

Ministers Reflect Damian Hinds



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Biographical details

Parliamentary history

2010 – present: Conservative MP for East Hampshire

Government career

2018–19: Secretary of state for education

2016–18: Minister of state for employment (Department for Work and Pensions)

2015–16: Exchequer secretary (HM Treasury)

2014–15: Assistant whip

Damian Hinds was interviewed by Tim Durrant and Dr Catherine Haddon on 19 September 2019 for the Institute for Government’s Ministers Reflect project.

Damian Hinds talks about his experience of different ministerial ranks and getting his dream job in government. He also reflects on how to work with a team of ministers and the effect of changing parliamentary arithmetic on the work of government.

Tim Durrant (TD): Can we start by talking about when you first entered government? You became exchequer secretary to the Treasury in 2015 – what was the first day like, how did you find out about that job?

DH: Well, David Cameron spoke individually to everybody who was having a government appointment. I remember he said to me at the time: “This is a good one. This is a very interesting one which you’ll love. It’s exchequer secretary to the Treasury.” Of course, I had absolutely no idea what that meant or entailed.

I’d been a whip before, but this was my first ministerial appointment. Of course, you just don’t know physically what happens until people tell you. You go through your little pep talk and questions about if there’s anything we should know – it was Sue Gray [former director-general of the Cabinet Office Propriety and Ethics team] at the time – and then told to turn up at your private office. What I found there – and in fact, every private office I’ve had has been a brilliant team – was a fantastic team at the Treasury with a fantastic PS [private secretary]. For them, it must be quite a scary moment because you literally don’t know who is going to walk across the threshold. You know who, but that probably doesn’t help you to know what that implies or who that person actually is, apart from their name. But they were very good at making me feel at home and as settled as you can possibly feel in what is actually one of the most unsettling days of your life. And then you get down to going through the massive lever arch files!

TD: Did you get any guidance from the prime minister or other senior ministers about what the detail of that role would be or what your portfolio would be?

DH: No. Actually, with the Treasury, although I guess this is true in every department, there’s even a little bit of... is ‘fungibility’ the word I’m looking for? Portfolios can move around a little bit between the junior ministers.

XST [exchequer secretary to the Treasury] is the most junior of the four at the Treasury, and in fact what that role does now is not the same as what was on my list when I was there, so it does move around a bit. But XST effectively does all the things that aren’t covered by someone else. So, if you’re CST [chief secretary to the Treasury], it’s pretty clear you’ll do public spending; if you’re the financial secretary, it’s pretty clear that you’re in charge of most tax; and if you’re the economic secretary, it’s clear you do the banking system. But then there’s a load of other stuff that the Treasury does as well.

There's also the commercial secretary, of course, who at the time was a member of the House of Lords. But then everything else falls to XST.

When I was there it was a very, very diverse set of responsibilities, everything from North Sea oil to childcare. So, it's very difficult to find exactly what the elements of commonality are.

TD: How did you work with those other ministers? What was your relationship like – did you cross paths day to day?

DH: At first, not that much. A very nice group of people, but we tended not to naturally come into contact with each other that often. And of course, the chancellor was a very busy man, and in particular George Osborne as chancellor was a very, very busy man. He had the entirety of the UK economy to worry about but also lots of wider governmental and political responsibilities. We didn't meet as a ministerial group as often as you might in other departments. We started semi-formally/informally meeting as a junior ministerial group under the auspices of either Greg Hands [then chief secretary to the Treasury] or David Gauke [then financial secretary to the Treasury], just to make sure that we were meeting moderately often and particular coming up to things like OPQs [oral parliamentary questions].

TD: Yes, so was Parliament a big focus of your time in the Treasury?

DH: It was quite a big focus. I specifically had some difficult legislative changes to take through on tax credits, which was a big part of my time there. And of course, the 2015 Budget was a landmark reforming budget and an awful lot flowed from it.

Catherine Haddon (CH): What was the relationship like with the chancellor? Because it varies. Some are very focused on their areas and pay very little attention to junior ministers; some work very well with the ministerial team. How was that?

DH: The reality was that you didn't see the chancellor that often for very understandable reasons. We did on occasion, but not that often. But through the civil service channels, you would often hear about what "the chancellor's steer" is on a policy area. I think you have to be a bit careful sometimes to not always just take that as the gospel truth because inevitably when someone says "this is the steer from the chancellor" (and in another way you get it from the prime minister or Number 10, which is not so identifiable an entity), inevitably those things are simplified.

You know when you are making decisions and when you start giving those kinds of steers to others, you realise quite often you are persuadable. Just with the facts you have in front of you and, given that you need to make decisions because you can't hang about, that is the clearest thing I can say with what I currently know. But that's not to say I wouldn't change my mind if somebody came with a compelling case to do something different.

TD: You mentioned about being a whip and you were also on a select committee as well before you became a minister. How did those two experiences inform your time as a minister?

DH: Everybody says it, but it's true, being a whip is a very useful thing. Before that, it's very possible as a backbench member of Parliament (although there are some things obviously you have to understand, you have to make sure you turn up to the right place and don't do something dumb) for the fine detail of parliamentary procedure to be something, thankfully because it's quite complicated, you don't necessarily have to worry about too much. And as a whip you really, really do, and that does help by extension to understand the legislative process and what things are likely to work, what things aren't and so on.

The other thing that being a whip is very good for is that you also learn a bit more about humanity as well as, you know, managing legislative progress and turning up at the right time in Westminster Hall to say "I beg to move" and all the rest of it. You're also responsible for two-way communication with a group of people, a group of very motivated, talented, knowledgeable people often with quite strong views. And you learn more about the human side of our constitution and how it works.

TD: And the select committee, did that inform your time as a minister?

DH: I'm not sure I would say that directly informed the transition to being in government. I loved it and it was very interesting and self-developmental in other ways. You learn more about how a select committee works and that in itself at a certain point becomes quite useful, but I'm not sure there's a direct read across into becoming a minister.

CH: In July 2016 then, you moved to DWP [the Department for Work and Pensions]. Talk us through that appointment and what it was like going into the department.

DH: That was great. I had very much enjoyed my time at the Treasury. As well as childcare, North Sea oil, and tobacco and gambling, the XST role also covered the Treasury aspect of welfare and employment, so there was a sort of bridge across in that sense.

CH: Do you think that the prime minister [Theresa May] had that in mind when she appointed you?

DH: That I don't know, but actually the person before me as XST was also the person before me as employment minister, which is Priti Patel. That may be entirely coincidental, I don't know. But it was a policy area I was very interested in, including employment and the welfare system. That role covers, effectively, working age, non-disability benefits and the huge project that is Universal Credit (UC). That obviously carries its own stresses and strains and huge opportunities. So, I was very excited to be in that role.

We were physically, as a group of ministers, much closer together. In the Treasury, you're in different corners – on the same floor but physically quite far; it's quite a big building. At DWP, we were pretty much in a row, and that has advantages and disadvantages. The disadvantages were that you're not as close to other people. You can't be physically close to everybody in the organisation, but I think it is good for the ministerial interaction. We met very regularly, and I enjoyed that time, although again there were some difficult things to deal with.

Inevitably, when you're responsible for a department that administers benefits through a network of 600+ outlets, with tens of thousands of people working in the organisation, and of course recipients of those benefits, in the whole range of circumstances, some of them in the most difficult to imagine circumstances – and when you're dealing with computer systems and administrative process, things sometimes go wrong. Sometimes they go wrong on an individual scale and sometimes they go wrong on a bigger scale to do with systems and processes. In that role, you were very, very conscious that at any time... I mean, you can't know exactly what's happening in those 600 outlets and with the entire roll of benefit recipients.

Universal Credit is a very important reform and a huge change in the welfare system and in supporting people into work. You could start to see some of the real benefit of that coming through. Working at the Treasury, I got out and about into the real world, as it were, sometimes. But at DWP, I was very often out in job centres talking to our staff there, who in turn were working with their client base. It was really striking, first of all, how motivated a workforce DWP employees are, the work coaches, but also how much potential they see in Universal Credit and the new system. Because Universal Credit isn't just a benefit, it's a whole way of working and way of interacting with people which is better than what was there before.

CH: How much was there a level of stock take at that time of where things were?

DH: We had more than one stock take, and we made changes and improvements. UC simplifies a lot of the previous benefits system, but that does come at a cost because for every individual circumstance that you have a tailored approach to, you do end up with quite an unwieldy system, sometimes a system that can get people stuck, through no fault of their own, but stuck in circumstances. You try to smooth it all out and make it more rational, more straightforward, but then it's not as tailored and so that can create difficulties. We made a number of changes during my time.

CH: How much of an adjustment is it on a personal front, in terms of the skill set and the knowledge needed? The Treasury has a strategic function even when you're looking in-depth at various policy areas. Whereas, as you said, DWP is managing a very large organisation and also getting into the weeds on some quite technical areas of UC. Did it challenge you personally in terms of skills or knowledge?

DH: Yeah, it was certainly different. Of course, as a minister it's not the same as being in operational management. You have responsibility but not direct management. That's our system and that's how it's always been. But you have a role in the operation and, as you said, it's different from the Treasury type of role. We also have a live system, as we were just discussing, in which problems sometimes emerge and you have to think about how you're going to change them. Sometimes you can anticipate things which might become a problem before they have and try and correct as you go. How do you seize more opportunities on, for example, older people's participation in the workforce and support for maternal employment? They're things which are important, but they're not inevitable consequences of having a benefits system and a network of job centres – they're things you have to do separately.

That was all very interesting stuff to work on and yeah, as you say, different from the Treasury. Of course, in the Treasury we had tax credits, but everybody knows tax credits are kind of on their way out, gradually and slowly. They'll be around for some time to come. But it's not a system, a physical IT system that you're going to invest in renewing and re-designing, whereas UC is at this very formative stage.

CH: You worked under two secretaries of state during your time at DWP. How did they approach running the department? How did they differ and how did that affect your role?

DH: Damian [Green], secretary of state for work and pensions 2016-17] and David [Gauke, secretary of state for work and pensions 2017-18] were both actually quite similar in many ways. I mean, very collegiate, both very nice people, easy to work for, interested to hear what their junior ministers had to say. I think they would say themselves that as secretary of state, it's not helpful to try to know the detail of every last policy, that's why you have a team, and run it like a team. I think we all felt very much like we were part of a collective with our individual responsibilities, but very much supporting each other and working together.

CH: Let's talk about your own move up to a secretary of state position, in January 2018. What's it like getting the call? Were you expecting it? Were you expecting a bump up to secretary of state level?

DH: I should firstly actually say I enjoyed being minister for employment, as I enjoyed being exchequer secretary. But yes, you're hopeful that you might be able to move up to the next level and do something on a wider area.

CH: Were there any conversations that happened in the run-up to it, the chief whip or anyone else sounding out? We're interested in what goes on before a reshuffle happens.

DH: No, not in the most obvious ways. Inevitably people here [in Parliament] talk to other people all the time about pretty much everything and other people may well have had direct conversations. That's obviously something I don't know. For me, no, not in that direct way.

I was delighted to be going to [the Department for] Education. On the night I was selected as a parliamentary candidate, I was asked: "One day, if things go well and we're in government and things go okay for you, what job one day would you like to do?" And I said I'd like to be a minister in the Department for Education. And I'd been on the Education Select Committee, I'd been the first chairman of the APPG [All Party Parliamentary Group] on Social Mobility, so education was absolutely my first love, if you like, in policy terms. And so, when the prime minister said to me that she'd like me to move into education, I couldn't have been happier. But it is also very daunting moving. Your first junior ministerial position feels like an avalanche, then moving from that to MoS [minister of state] position feels like an avalanche, and then, actually, it's difficult to explain how much bigger an avalanche that is, moving from MoS to SoS [secretary of state], it's a huge increase in workload. But there you are.

CH: What's the induction like into the department, how did that go?

DH: Very well. There was an awful lot to take in and take on and obviously, in our system, there isn't an induction period. Normally there is induction, but it's happening in parallel with the job and the next morning at 9:30am is Cabinet. And things are happening, there were things that required an instant, urgent decision which you just can't put off. But that parallel induction process... I mean, probably with me that was made a bit easier by the fact that I have always, even when I was doing other jobs, taken a very close interest in what's happening in education. But the department did a good job in setting up teach-ins and giving me large amounts of paper to go through and so on.

But I think it would be difficult to overstate how difficult the first two weeks is in a secretary of state job because everything is happening at once. There's that learning process, there's all the urgent and important stuff, but also you have to deal with the media in a very different way from what you do in a different ministerial role. You get another avalanche of correspondence. Almost everybody you've ever known in the last 30 years, it seems, wants to talk. All this, administratively, is a lot to deal with as well. With some people this wouldn't be the case, but you don't have your SpAds [special advisers], and that is the fortnight when way above any other fortnight you absolutely need special advisers in place. And that, for me, took some time. I got two brilliant special advisers in the end, but it took time to do.

CH: You're then in charge of a ministerial team, so how did you approach that? How did your experience of other secretaries of state affect that?

DH: I took a similar view, I think, to how I perceived the view of David [Gauke] and Damian [Green] and DWP to be, that first of all there is a value in bringing people together and even if there isn't necessarily that long a list of things where the roles overlap (although there are quite a few actually where they do overlap). We're all members of Parliament and we are colleagues. Sometimes in a ministerial role, it can feel a bit lonely actually, because so many things are coming to you for your decision, and sometimes just being able to kick things about and talk about stuff is helpful.

I also took the view that I should have quite a lot of one-to-one time with every member of the team, and an important question to ask on each of those occasions is: "How can I support you to do your stuff?" I tried to follow that through throughout. I was also blessed in having a really good mix of ministers at DfE [Department for Education], including Nick Gibb [minister of state for school standards], who, apart from a short period away, has been there forever, since 2010, and in opposition as well, so there was a huge amount there for me learn from Nick. [Lord] Theodore Agnew [parliamentary under-secretary of state for the school system], who was relatively recently in post at the DfE, had been a minister elsewhere but more importantly had headed an academy trust and knew an awful lot about education, and Anne Milton [former minister of state for skills and apprenticeships], who is a very respected, senior colleague. Nadhim [Zahawi, former parliamentary under-secretary of state for children and families], Sam [Gyimah, former minister of state for universities, science, research and innovation]. It was a very good blend to have on the team.

CH: And what about your priorities? As you say, you're inheriting a role in progress, but were you able to then carve out what you wanted to do with the role?

DH: Yes. There are always constraints, but yes. You have to be clear headed about what you want to do. When you start one of these roles everybody says to you "You must only have three priorities", and of course the problem is you can't only have three priorities. For a start, if you take the education role, it covers nursery, primary, secondary, college, university, children's social care. I mean, a huge range of things, and there are very important things going on in every one of those sectors simultaneously. But of course, the advice is still right! Actually, you do need to focus and prioritise, but that's a constant struggle because you know there are so many other things that you want to be doing and could be doing.

CH: Maybe you can talk us through some of the things that you were working on. I think there was the Augar Review [on post-18 education] during your time there. Can you talk to us a bit about that, how it went and your reflections also on the impact you think it has had or will have?

DH: There were a couple of big external reviews, Philip Augar's review was one of them, also Edward Timpson [former minister of state for children and families] was doing an important review on school exclusions. And we had other big pieces of work going on as well, one in particular on children in need, which is the term of children who are known to a social worker but not formally in the care system. They tend to have outcomes actually very similar to children in the care system but don't get nearly as much attention in Parliament, in the media as children in care. And on the Augar Review, Philip himself is a very effective chair and leader of that kind of review. He is first of all very personable, he is easy to talk to, easy to deal with, but he's also firm and I think he was probably an ideal choice for that review. Difficult, in some ways, waters to navigate, because there are competing objectives for what you're trying to do with the higher education system. The 2012 system, the system we have now, is actually a good system. It's quite a complex system, and as MPs we hear from constituents and others who don't like individual aspects of the system. It's usually one individual aspect that the person doesn't like, and quite often we could change that but only by moving another variable somewhere else in the system. But Philip, I think, did a great job with his team, actually the whole of the panel did a good job, and we got to where we got to politically, and obviously there's been a change of prime minister and we will see what comes in the future.

CH: What about the move of universities from BIS [the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills], over to DfE in 2016? How did that work, having a joint minister covering that?

DH: It worked fine actually. It's a bit like skills, you can always argue that it should be in this one or it should be in that one. It's like in business, where I've spent more of my career than I have in politics. There's always a tension between centralisation and devolution, and every 10 years you re-organise and you say: "No, it's gone too far, we're pulling back". I think the shared approach actually has worked pretty well.

CH: And what about more generally with the sector, the relationship with teachers, the unions, etcetera? How did you manage that, how did you approach that?

DH: I had a good relationship with all of the teaching union leaders that I came into contact with, and the headteacher representative bodies. We had good, constructive discussions. I don't think it's any secret that there were some things that the National Education Union, formerly the NUT [National Union of Teachers], say that obviously we are going to disagree about, but that doesn't stop you having constructive engagement. I think it was good engagement that we had in my time. Obviously, there were things that the sector will always be lobbying for, we had many discussions about school funding and we'd always had the prospect of a spending review coming up, but the timings worked

on an anticipated spending review in the autumn, but that was when we thought we were leaving the European Union on 29 March 2019. It became quite complicated, but obviously that funding settlement is now made and that's a good thing. But yeah, it's a big sector, 450,000 teachers, another 400,000-ish adults working in schools. It's a big, big, significant part of the population and a very knowledgeable one and a very inspiring one, which a lot of other people look to.

CH: And one issue that IfG has always had an interest in is the role that ministerial directions has, and you issued the first ever DfE ministerial direction of that sort [on the rollout of T Levels]. Talk us through what happened there.

DH: That was relatively early on in my time. I heard from the permanent secretary, who rightly sets out his concerns and, as is public, advised that we shouldn't proceed as planned. For me, this was a core government policy initiative. Vocational and technical qualifications don't get as much press as GCSEs and A Levels. That is a fact of life, but it doesn't make them any less important. And in truth we needed – we need – strong reform and a simplification in that landscape of technical and vocational, and T Levels based on the Sainsbury Report [on post-16 skills] is the key vehicle for doing that.

There are other aspects to it as well, like high-level technical qualifications and so on, but T Levels are absolutely essential. I also heard from others in the organisation, other civil servants, and I wanted to know can we do this if we pull out all the stops – if I do everything I can politically that's needed, and indeed non-politically, whatever is needed to support, can we do it? And I took the view that I hadn't heard anything that told me it was impossible, and therefore I wanted to press on. And that was difficult, obviously, that's a difficult decision to make for the reason you mentioned, it's not a common thing to do, but I think it was the right thing to do.

TD: You mentioned about the importance of visits as a DWP minister. Did you get out and about as secretary of state as well?

DH: I did. I did 101 schools and 140 or 150-something visits all together. And it is so crucial, because in the one day in the week or the one and a half days in the week when you're out and about, you always learn more than you do in the three and a half that you're in the office. It's not to say that you don't have to be in the office for those three and a half days, because there are things you have to do, but in terms of actually learning stuff, finding stuff out, getting ideas. Sometimes finding the 'on-the-ground' truth about a policy, and this was true at DWP as well, you know how a policy is meant to work but it's only when you talk to the people doing it that you discover what actually happens in practice. And the school system is an immensely complex organism, and I suppose it would be rare that you would have a simple, straightforward cause and effect process going on where policy is made and down on the ground at 21,500 schools it happened exactly as you expected it would.

CH: What's the thing you're most proud of from your time at DfE?

DH: I am proud of a number of things. I was there a year and a half and in that time you get to pick up a lot of existing programmes and see them through and deliver them, so in a sense it's your name on the thing when it comes out but you didn't initiate it because it's been in progress for some time. And there are other things which you get to start that you don't actually get to see all the way through. In terms of things that came out during my time there, having an integrated recruitment and retention strategy for teachers. It's not the first time we'd had a recruitment programme, clearly, but to integrate those things properly was a really important thing.

Relationships and sex education becoming mandatory is something else I'm proud of. Obviously, there's been some controversy attached to that as well, but I think is a hugely important step forward. And also, added to it, health education, and I think partly because these things are so closely overlapping. What's happening with kids when they're growing up in their relationships and the read across to mental health and the link between mental and physical health, and also I wanted to make sure that we fully reflected and tried to be as up to date as we possibly could be (in the knowledge that you're never totally up to date with the online world). I wanted to not just have children learning about – important though it is – being safe online, but actually trying as much as possible to get to the fundamentals of the internet and technology and why people might behave differently when they are behind a computer screen than they do in person. Why they might behave differently again when they are anonymous than when you know who they are. Why and how somebody might want to track your behaviour to be able to sell you something and so on. So, all those things, I think, were important.

In terms of new stuff initiated, I am really proud that we started, in a relatively small way, Opportunity North East. A part of the country which has some brilliant schools but on average there's disparity between primary and secondary, so there's an overwhelming prominence of really strong education at primary, and although there is, of course, great education at secondary, there's not enough. And so, we put in place a programme called Opportunity North East, to seek to address that.

And then something else which hadn't had much political or had less political interest in times past is home. So, if you study the social mobility literature, it is unavoidable that the gaps in attainment and development between wealthier families' children, and poorer families' children on average – and again of course we can only speak in terms of averages – starts very, very early in life. And it is then unavoidable to realise that a lot of that is about what happens at home, not just what happens in nursery settings and school. But it's a very difficult area for politicians, or indeed anybody in public administration, to tread in, because the home is rightly the private domain, nobody wants to be thought to be saying: "I know better than you know how to bring up your children". So, it's very difficult and you have to tread very carefully. So, we brought in, it's still coming in, a campaign bringing together the sector but also voluntary organisations and

indeed private sector organisations, to see how families can be helped and supported in a totally voluntary way, to make it easier to pick stuff up to help in children's early language and communications development. And I think that's a really important step forward.

TD: You were in Parliament during the coalition government, you went into government after the 2015 majority and then moved into a minority government [after the 2017 general election]. Could you just talk about how the different parliamentary arithmetic affected your different roles?

DH: I think we were all quite pleasantly surprised by how well the coalition worked. Of course, I came in in 2010, so I didn't actually know anything else. But it was striking, and in particular for those of us from constituencies where historically we had been fighting against the Liberal Democrats, to discover that actually, once you get through the process and you all turn up at the same place of work, you can co-operate quite well. And so, in the Whips' Office, we partly had joint teams and then partly we had separate Conservative and Lib Dem whips groups, which I think is probably the right way to do it. It's a good balance.

But we all got along. I mean, you couldn't really tell the difference, everyone just did the same stuff and that worked really well. And then, after 2015, I suppose I'd just started as a junior [minister] at the Treasury, it was the 2015 Budget with the National Living Wage and all the reforms was, from the point of view of a Conservative MP, a watershed moment and a really important marker. Then, quite quickly, the referendum became the biggest thing. I was obviously at the Treasury and, as David Cameron was saying on the *Today* programme this morning, it was government policy to support Remain and specifically at the Treasury. The Treasury does the numbers, makes the projections, and so that was an essential part of what was happening there. Then the result of the referendum comes out and you sort of realised that at this moment everything changes. And of course, it did with the resignation of the PM.

All of us had to adjust our assumptions, adjust our reality. I think we probably didn't quite realise, or I didn't quite realise, quite how many and how big [the change would be]. Some of the knock-on implications of the existence of the referendum and the results, how big those things were going to be. And then of course, the 2017 election. It came as a surprise, and then having been a surprise, then looked like a brilliant idea. And then obviously, from the point of view of my party, didn't quite go as we would have wanted. And then you find yourself not having adequate numbers in Parliament. Again, you realise from this moment everything changes. But I don't think again I realised quite how much and quite how many things changed as a result of that. And the reality, of course, has been that, although it's quite a good discipline to not always be legislating, because arguably we have too much legislation; it is a real problem when you can't legislate at all and it's not only controversial things that you can't legislate for, because of the existence of amendments. So effectively, even things that are going to be totally a matter of

consensus, or almost entirely a matter of consensus, are still difficult to do because of the possibility of amendments.

TD: You mentioned the EU referendum and the result. Brexit obviously had less of a direct impact on your roles in DWP and DfE than other areas of government, but as a minister in the post-referendum government, what impact did it have on your day job? How did it affect what you were overseeing?

DH: You're right, in the roles I've had it has had relatively limited impact. In DfE, it mostly involved questions around university programmes and exchange programmes and Erasmus; in DWP, there were questions about portability of pensions and so on, but that wasn't my direct area. I guess the point is more where you do a morning media round to make an announcement about something on education and you spend 12 out of 14 minutes talking about Europe. Although you have to do that, it's the big topic of the day, it is frustrating from the point of view of important stuff we're trying to do on education.

CH: We haven't really talked about the relationship with Number 10, but when they know you're about to go and do a media round, everyone knows there will be some Brexit questions. Were they able to give you the right lines, did you always feel prepared enough on what the current position was on whatever it might be?

DH: Well, yes, and I should say there were some absolutely first-rate people in the Number 10 operation working on some of these subjects and being able to hear from them direct was the single most valuable and most important thing. I think, for those of us who did quite a number of interviews over an extended period on the deal and so on, you also formulated your own narrative and approach, which you can't afford to do on those subjects which come and go within a couple of days. You just actually don't have the gift of time, of being able to sit down and work out exactly how you'd like to structure things and how you'd like stories, messages to fit together. But on this one, it kept on coming back! *[laughs]*.

CH: You then left government in the July 2019 reshuffle [after Boris Johnson became prime minister], so talk us through the experience, what happened, what it was like.

DH: Well, it's not a happy experience for anybody, but we knew there was going to be change. I'd been hopeful to stay in government, hopeful to stay in that job which I loved. But that's the nature of this line of work, it's not got much job security. Then you go to being a backbencher again, which is in itself a busy role, obviously, and it's always the first role – your first role is representing your constituents and doing everything you can for your community. And that is a huge privilege and pleasure to do.

TD: Has being a minister, a cabinet minister, has that changed the way that you fulfil that constituency MP role?

DH: Yeah probably. I mean, for one thing, you certainly know better how government works and how the lobbying works, what has some chance of being effective and frankly what doesn't have any chance of being effective. So yes, I am sure it will. It's still relatively early days, and we've been in a relatively unusual period, but I look back on my time in government with immense gratitude. Not many people have the opportunity to do one of these jobs, and yeah, I loved it.

CH: What would your advice be to a new minister starting out?

DH: Well, make the most of it. You don't know how long it will last, but you have with you a private office, a private secretary who are there to help you to get your priorities done. In my experience, civil servants are an amazing group of people, in particular your private office is the key resource to work with. Also, just in that first period, there's so much happening all at once it's really important to try and retain clarity on what are the top, top things that you want to prioritise. It's very difficult, because there are always more things that you could and should be doing, but that prioritisation is very important.

CH: We always say to people you need your three priorities, but it's a very good point. You can't, because there's just so much. And yet, you do need to keep dragging yourself back to what is the big picture here, what am I trying to achieve? Because otherwise you're just firefighting constantly.

DH: Yes. I think in many ways the trick is not so much the number of priorities you have, but they should be *your* priorities. So, lots of other people can bring you priorities, but you need to have clarity of thought and of priority. I used to have 1A priorities and 1B priorities, because the other thing is, of course, the messaging in the organisation: if you tell somebody you're working on an area which is not one of my top priorities, that's not great motivationally. So, you have to balance up all of these things, and actually some of the lower profile issue. For example, the administration of teachers' pensions is never going to appear on anybody's whiteboard [as an exciting policy area] – but... God, if it went wrong, you'd be in trouble. So, you have to also distinguish new departures and developments from doing the basics brilliantly.

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